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Why papers are rejected and how to get yours accepted: Advice on the construction of interpretive consumer research articles

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Why papers are rejected and how to get yours accepted

Advice on the construction of interpretive consumer research articles

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Abstract

Purpose – Interpretive consumer researchers frequently devote months, if not years, to writing a new paper. Despite their best efforts, the vast majority of these papers are rejected by top academic journals. This paper aims to explain some of the key reasons that scholarly articles are rejected and illuminate how to reduce the likelihood of rejection.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a dialogical collaboration between a co-editor of the *Journal of Consumer Research* and two junior scholars who represent the intended audience of this paper. Each common reason for rejecting papers, labeled as Problems 1-8, is followed by precautionary measures and detailed examples, labeled as solutions.

Findings – The paper offers eight pieces of advice on the construction of interpretive consumer research articles: (1) Clearly indicate which theoretical conversation your paper is joining as early as possible. (2) Join a conversation that belongs in your target journal. (3) Conclude your review of the conversation with gaps, problems and questions. (4) Only ask research questions that your data can answer. (5) Build your descriptive observations about contexts into theoretical claims about concepts. (6) Explain both how things are and why things are the way that they are. (7) Illustrate your theoretical claims with data and support them with theoretical argumentation. (8) Advance the theoretical conversation in a novel and radical way.

Originality/value – The goal of this paper is to help interpretive consumer researchers, especially junior scholars, publish more papers in top academic journals such as the *Journal of Consumer Research*.

Keywords Qualitative research, Interpretive research, Consumer research, Manuscript rejection, Theoretical contribution

Paper type Technical paper

Introduction

Interpretive consumer researchers frequently devote months, if not years, to writing a new paper. Despite their best efforts, the vast majority of these papers are rejected by top academic journals. The *Journal of Consumer Research* (*JCR*), for instance, routinely rejects approximately 90 per cent of its submissions (*eJCR*, 2016). In this article, we explain some of the key reasons that scholarly articles are rejected and illuminate how to reduce the likelihood of rejection. Our goal is to help interpretive consumer researchers, especially junior scholars, publish more papers in top academic journals.

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Numerous scholars have elucidated why academic research papers are rejected in other social science disciplines (Ahlstrom, 2012; Bradbury, 2012; Daft, 1995; Griffiths and Norman, 2016; Whetten, 1989). What distinguishes our advice from prior commentaries is a focus on the construction of theoretically positioned, interpretive, consumer research papers (Figueiredo *et al.*, forthcoming; Gopaldas, 2016; Hogg and Maclaran, 2008). In maintaining this specific focus, we do not elaborate on generic reasons for rejection, such as faulty logic, sloppy organization or poor writing.

This article is a dialogical collaboration between two junior scholars in the field of consumer research, who represent the intended audience of this article, and a co-editor of *JCR*, who serves on the editorial review boards of multiple marketing and management journals. The three-author team sifted through several prior commentaries on publication hurdles and their own cumulative authoring, editing and reviewing experiences to identify the key drivers of manuscript rejection in interpretive consumer research.

The article is organized as follows. Each common reason for rejecting papers (labeled as Problem 1, 2, 3 [...]) is followed by precautionary measures and detailed examples (labeled as Solutions). Examples highlight recent articles by newer contributors, primarily from *JCR*. For more classic examples of interpretive consumer research, we refer readers to other literature reviews (Arnould and Thompson, 2005, 2007, 2015; Belk *et al.*, 2013; Cova and Elliott, 2008).

Problem 1: the reviewers cannot tell what conversation your paper is joining

Solutions: reviewers expect you to signal which conversation you are joining as early as possible in your paper. The metaphor of "joining a conversation" refers to the work of positioning your paper in a particular set of prior studies that have already discussed your focal theoretical concept, relationship or domain. Unfortunately, authors often fail to signal how their work is related to and distinct from a particular set of prior studies. This is especially true when an author superficially cites multiple prior studies, yet provides no discernible theoretical anchor to connect them. Be clear about what anchors the conversation that you are joining, name the conversation in terms of that anchor and keep your literature review focused on that anchor.

Consider Luedicke's (2015, p. 124) article on the theoretical conversation about consumer acculturation. Even though Luedicke partially engages with numerous other theoretical conversations, including those about "ethnic group conflict, consumer racism, and consumer relationships", it remains clear from the title, abstract, section headers and entire frontend of the article that the primary conversation this paper joins and advances is the one on consumer acculturation.

Epp and Velagaleti's (2014) case-based research on childcare service consumption contributes to a theoretical conversation on outsourcing care-work. Moisio and Beruchashvili's (2010) ethnographic study of support groups contributes to a theoretical conversation on consumer well-being. In each of these example articles, the authors clearly identify the conversation that their paper is joining in the first few paragraphs, if not the very first one.

Problem 2: the conversation that your paper is joining does not belong in the journal

Solutions: above all, make sure that your article is about one of the journal's core concerns. At *JCR*, for instance, the core concerns include consumers, consumption and consumer culture. Next, join a conversation that is already taking place in your target journal. If there is no ready-made conversation for you to join, it is incumbent upon you to rhetorically construct a conversation from studies in that journal and its allied journals.

As a case in point, Press and Arnould (2011) advance a theoretical conversation on organizational identification, a conversation historically situated in organization studies, not consumer research. However, these authors make their conversation relevant to *JCR* by adding a consumer behavior perspective. This added perspective links organizational identification to productive consumption and demonstrates the blurring of consumer and employee roles. Focusing attention on these consumer issues makes the paper more suitable for *JCR*.

As another example from the *Journal of Marketing*, Ertimur and Coskuner-Balli (2015, p. 40) position their longitudinal study of the multi-logic yoga market in the managerial conversation on strategic brand management. Drawing on insights from successful brands in the yoga market, this paper offers "a managerial framework for managing conflicting demands of logics, conveying brand legitimacy and creating a coherent brand identity in plural logic markets", thereby contributing to core branding concerns in marketing management research.

Problem 3: the paper reviews the conversation without identifying any major gaps, problems or questions

Solutions: in any paper, although it is undoubtedly important to highlight what is known about the focal construct, it is essential to highlight what is *not* known or what is problematic about prior work on the focal construct. Though you need not explicitly state a research question that addresses some limitation of the prior literature, one or more clearly stated research questions will almost always be helpful in drawing attention to what your unique contribution to the conversation will be.

As an example, Scaraboto (2015, p. 154) notes that hybrid economies, which combine market-based exchange, sharing, gift-giving and other modes of exchange, have become increasingly prevalent in internet-based networks of collaboration among consumers and producers. However, because prior research has focused on pure (i.e. market and non-market) modes of exchange, little is known about the nature of hybrid economies. Two specific research questions follow directly from this oversight:

RQ1. How do hybrid economies emerge in collaborative consumer–producer networks?

RQ2. What is the role of consumers in shaping and sustaining hybrid economies?

Also of note, Brown *et al.* (2013) revive a long-standing conversation on marketplace myths by asking what makes some myths more popular, meaningful and enduring than others. Drawing on the case of the Titanic myth, the authors make their contribution by highlighting the importance of ambiguity to the success of certain myths, explaining that ambiguity stimulates consumer engagement in meaning-making.

Problem 4: you do not have the data to answer your research questions

Solutions: a mismatch between your data and your research questions can arise from divergent units, levels or modes of analysis. There are two possible solutions to an incongruity between your data and your questions. One solution is to go back to the field and get the appropriate data to answer your questions. Another solution is to change your questions to match the data that you do have.

The match is good when both the data and the research questions address the same units, levels or modes of analysis. As an example, Russell and Levy (2012) conduct phenomenological interviews about re-reading books, re-watching movies and re-visiting places to provide a better understanding of the consumer experience of volitional re-consumption. In this article, both the questions and the data address individual consumer experiences.

In another example, Parmentier and Fischer (2015) conduct a longitudinal, multi-sited netnography of fans of America's Next Top Model to highlight how consumers can collectively contribute to the decline of a once thriving brand. Both the questions and the data address brand-audience-level dynamics. Moreover, the longitudinal nature of the data set enables the authors to identify the consumer-propelled processes that contribute to audience dissipation over time.

Problem 5: your findings are too descriptive and you have not made theoretical claims

Solutions: reviewers complain that your findings are "too descriptive" when contexts and phenomena are merely described, without linkages to theoretical concepts and conversations. The solution to this problem is to build your descriptive observations about your contexts into theoretical claims about concepts.

Consider Arsel and Bean (2013, p. 910) whose work is situated in the context of *Apartment Therapy*, a home design blog. In their analysis, they abstract up from this context to advance a conversation on the concept of taste regimes; they draw on practice theory as an enabling lens to help them do so. In the presentation of their findings, these authors link each example from their data to elements of practice theory. For instance, a blog entry about maintaining a landing strip near the entrance to one's home is interpreted in practice-theoretic terms as a "problematization" of links between objects and meanings, an "instrumentalization" of objects to actualize meanings, and a "ritualization" of objects and doings.

Drawing on the MiniMoto supercross market as a case study and actor–network theory as an enabling lens, Martin and Schouten (2014, p. 855) develop a theory of consumption-driven market emergence as:

> […] a process of multiple translations wherein consumers mobilize human and nonhuman actors to co-constitute products, practices, and infrastructures, [which in turn] drive the growth of interlinked communities of practice, which ultimately are translated into a fully functioning market.

As a rule of thumb, a theoretical claim such as the one quoted here lacks any mention of your context.

Problem 6: your theoretical claims state how things are, but not why things are the way they are

Solutions: although as scholars we are often interested in a conceptual understanding of how things are (e.g. behavioral patterns, differences, similarities, processes, etc.), top journals often expect us to explain why things are the way they are (i.e. the underlying psychological, economic, cultural and social dynamics). As Whetten (1989, p. 491) argues, the "why" component of any model is "the theoretical glue that welds the model together".

One way to prevent this common oversight is to explicitly ask and answer at least one "why" question in addition to any "how" questions. For example, Scaraboto and Fischer (2013, p. 1234) asked, "why and how do marginalized consumers mobilize to seek greater inclusion in and more choice from mainstream markets". The answers to these research questions include the triggers that mobilize marginalized consumers (why) and the change strategies that may produce greater choice for those consumers (how).

Similarly, Tumbat and Belk (2011, p. 43) attempt to explain both "why" and "how" some extraordinary consumption experiences do not fit the romantic and communal ideals identified in prior research. Drawing on an ethnography of mountain-climbing, the authors discover that "commercialism and competition for uniqueness within [an] individual performance ideology create numerous tensions [among participants]", thus rendering such group consumption activities more individualistic and competitive than those examined in prior research.

Problem 7: your theoretical claims are illustrated by vivid data, but not supported by theoretical argumentation

Solutions: presenting data to support your emergent theoretical claims is not enough to convince a discerning reader. Likewise, citing another study with similar findings is also not enough. While data can vividly illustrate a claim, only theoretically informed argumentation can fully support a claim. Our advice on this issue is to always use both data and theoretical logic to support your major theoretical claims.

As a case in point, consider Bardhi and Eckhardt's (2012) study of access-based consumption. One of the major claims of their study is that consumers do not identify with accessed objects. To elucidate this assertion, the authors present several excerpts from interviews with ZipCar users. One illustrative quote follows: "I really don't care [about the car]. I know that it's a shared car. I get a little grossed out because people have smoked cigarettes in the car" (p. 888). To support their claim, these authors draw on contagion research, which suggests that consumers are disgusted by previously used objects. Their use of vivid data and a theoretically informed argument make a more convincing case together than either could alone.

Problem 8: your paper does not make a significant contribution to the conversation

Solutions: this problem is probably the most common one and the most difficult to solve. We propose that a significant contribution is one that is both novel rather than familiar and radical rather than incremental. In other words, you need to offer readers something "new" and "big".

Gopaldas (2014) makes a significant contribution to the theoretical conversation on consumer emotion *by introducing a new level of analysis*. This article elevates the *JCR* conversation on emotion from a psychological focus on "individual, momentary, and reactive emotional episodes" (affect) to a sociological focus on "collective, enduring, and proactive emotional dispositions" (sentiments, p. 1,008). In developing a theory of sentiments, the article reconceptualizes culture as a system of discourses, sentiments and practices, wherein sentiments play a critical role of energizing consumers to engage in both discourses and practices.

Fischer *et al.* (2007) make a significant contribution to the theoretical conversation on goal striving *by revealing the interactions between two traditionally parallel levels of analysis*, namely, cultural and cognitive levels of analysis. These authors reveal how culturally pervasive ideologies, including fatalism, rationalism and self-management, differentially shape consumers' cognitive appraisals, action planning and goal maintenance decisions, thereby developing a hybrid cultural–cognitive model of consumer goal striving.

Thomas *et al.* (2013) make a significant contribution to the vast literature on consumption communities *by introducing a novel way of thinking about a familiar phenomenon.* These authors draw on the actor–network theory to conceptualize community as "a network of heterogeneous actors (i.e. individuals, institutions and resources)" (p. 1,010). This shift allows the authors to offer a broad conceptualization of consumption communities, which unites prior research on brand communities, consumption subcultures and consumer tribes, to consider the impact of heterogeneity in consumption communities, and finally, to demonstrate how such heterogeneity is managed by multiple actors.

Conclusion

In summation, we offer eight pieces of advice on the construction of interpretive consumer research articles:

(1) Clearly indicate which theoretical conversation your paper is joining. Do so as early as possible in the paper.

(2) Join a theoretical conversation that belongs in your target journal. Alternatively, target a journal that cares about the conversation that you are joining.

(3) Conclude your review of the theoretical conversation with gaps, problems and ideally specific research questions that your study will address.

(4) Collect the data that you need to answer your research questions. Alternatively, only ask research questions that your data can answer.

(5) Build your descriptive observations about contexts into theoretical claims about concepts.

(6) Explain both *how* things are and *why* things are the way that they are.

(7) Illustrate your theoretical claims with data and support them with theoretical argumentation.

(8) Advance the theoretical conversation in a novel and radical way. In other words, offer readers something "new" and "big".

We hope that this advice will assist you in publishing your papers in top academic journals. Good luck!

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